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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ADDIS ABABA 002535

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR R, AF/PDPA, AND AF/E

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [ET](#)

SUBJECT: INCREASED INTIMIDATION OF THE PRIVATE PRESS

REF: A. ADDIS 2208

[1](#)B. ADDIS 1060

Classified By: Information Officer Michael Gonzales for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) In recent months, the Ethiopian Government (GoE) has significantly ramped up intimidation of the foreign and private press. In early October, the State Prosecutor requested the file of Washington Post reporter Kassahun Addis from the Government Communications Affairs Office (GCAO), prompting Kassahun to flee Ethiopia for Kenya. Recently, the state-owned Addis Zemen Amharic language newspaper has targeted the opposition-leaning Amharic weekly Addis Neger. An Addis Zemen "opinion" article on October 17 explicitly labeled Addis Neger as "anti-democracy, nihilistic, and anti-establishment," and specifically named Editor-in-Chief Tamerat Negera as a chief driver of this slant. The article accused the paper of supporting opposition groups and equated Addis Neger with Addis Zena -- a private newspaper which the GoE forcibly closed in 2005. Tamerat Negera informed Information Officer on October 21 that he will flee to South Africa on November 12 if he is not arrested before, and that within two months Addis Neger will shut down. And on October 24, an op-ed in the state-owned English language paper Ethiopian Herald severely criticized, Amare Aregawi, the general manager of The Reporter, a privately-owned weekly published in both English and Amharic, for having "an avaricious appetite for milking riches from the misuse of the free press." Foreign and local journalists in Ethiopia cite these and other examples (see background below) as part of a concerted and systematic effort by the GoE to silence criticism as the country sinks further into a drought-induced humanitarian crisis and approaches national elections next Spring. End Summary.

BACKGROUND

[1](#)2. (SBU) Shortly after the GoE protested to then-Ambassador Yamamoto regarding a VOA Amharic Service broadcast by Genocide Watch head Greg Stanton (Ref. B), the Ethiopian Revenue and Customs Authority (ERCA) detained VOA stringer Meleskachew Amaha on May 27 for six weeks allegedly for illegally attempting to sell broadcasting equipment that had been brought into Ethiopia duty free. Despite the fact that ERCA is not a law enforcement entity, the Authority held Meleskachew for over six weeks in June in their Old Airport neighborhood office (not a formal detention facility) while

they investigated his case. It was only after Ambassador Yamamoto visited Meleskachew at the ERCA office that the Ethiopian High Court ordered his release and dropped all charges against him for lack of evidence to substantiate the charges. Still, international and local journalists alike noted to Information Officer that the action had had a chilling effect on their profession and many admitted increasing self-censorship to avoid drawing the GoE's attention.

¶3. (SBU) As detailed in Ref. A, in late-August the State-owned and controlled Addis Zemen newspaper -- viewed by journalists and the international community as an indicator of the pulse of the ruling party and GoE -- ran two pseudonymous "opinion" pieces which falsely accused USAID of attempting to intervene in Ethiopia's domestic political affairs by financing and influencing the press. In an unrelated meeting, ruling party central committee member Tekleowini Assefa noted to USAID/Ethiopia Mission Director Tom Staal that he was confident someone very senior within the GoE wrote the Addis Zemen articles condemning USAID's activities. While Addis Zemen ceased running these direct attacks on USAID after Embassy Officers raised our objection with Minister for Government Communications Bereket Simon on September 4, the newspaper and the ruling party-controlled Aiga Forum webpage have continued to refer to the alleged incident and implied that the private press is a tool of foreign powers. Local journalists reported practicing self-censorship and keeping a low, depoliticized profile while the GoE remained on this track.

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MOST RECENT INCIDENTS OF PRESS INTIMIDATION

¶4. (C) In discussions with Information Officer on September 24 and 28, Washington Post reporter and Time Magazine correspondent Kassahun Addis said he had received information from an Ethiopian Government Communications Affairs Office contact reporting that the Ethiopian State Prosecutor had requested Kassahun's file from the GCAO. After consultation with several local journalist colleagues, Kassahun decided to flee to Kenya rather than be subjected to what he believed to be an imminent attempt to arrest and detain him. Kassahun left Ethiopia on September 29.

¶5. (C) In conversations with Information Officer, Kassahun noted that a few years ago he had filed a story without having journalist credentials, and he speculated that that could be the basis for a GoE arrest attempt. Kassahun further explained that in addition to working for the Washington Post and Time magazine, he has periodically assisted Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International teams during their visits to Ethiopia. Another journalist noted that last year Kassahun helped a Time magazine team doing a story on drought and malnutrition. At that time, when Kassahun obtained the credentials for the visiting Time team, the GCAO advised him to take the team to several very specific locations. Instead, Kassahun took the team to places where he knew the drought and its impact to be worse. That journalist source informed Information Officer that the GoE does not often explicitly bar journalists from areas, but in telling journalists where they should go, the GoE is effectively telling them where not to go. The source reports that all journalists in Ethiopia understand this system; by flouting it, Kassahun crossed the line with the GoE.

¶6. (C) In discussions with Information Officer, a variety of Ethiopian and foreign journalists have independently speculated that the GoE aims to limit international press coverage of Ethiopia, especially as 2010 elections approach. All have suggested that since it is relatively more difficult to bar foreign journalists from reporting, the alleged targeting of Kassahun may reflect the beginning of a new trend by the GoE to target the Ethiopian staff,

correspondents, and facilitators of international journalists and media outlets.

¶7. (C) Throughout early October, Addis Zemen has published a series of pseudonymous "opinion" pieces that have shifted from the broad targeting of the private media to a much more focused attack on what has emerged as the most influential Amharic language newspaper publishing political analysis, Addis Neger. On October 17, these attacks reached a crescendo in an Addis Zemen commentary accusing Addis Neger of being "anti-democracy, nihilistic, and anti-establishment." The piece explicitly accused Addis Neger and its Editor-in-Chief Tamerat Negera of "destroying the key values of the democratic system itself" and of "advocating for Ginbot Seven," the Diaspora political movement founded by former Mayor-elect of Addis Ababa which has called for struggle by any means. The commentary specifically equated Addis Neger with the former newspaper Addis Zena. Addis Zena was forcibly closed by the GoE, and its editorial board was arrested and charged with capital offenses in the 2005 post-election political turmoil. On October 19, in a meeting with a British Embassy press specialist, State Minister for Government Communications Shimelis Kamal argued that "Addis Neger should be eliminated." Later that day, a contact within GCAO told the Addis Ababa-based Daily Nation reporter Argaw Ashene that the GCAO had drawn up a list of the six top Addis Neger officials, including Tamerat, who they plan to target in order to silence the newspaper's analysis.

¶8. (C) On October 21, Tamerat Negera informed Information Officer that these explicit threats against him have prompted him to flee Ethiopia. The Addis Zemen commentary represents the first time a

state-run entity has explicitly targeted an individual from a private media house since the 2005 post-election turmoil.

Tamerat was already planning on participating in a World Bank-organized workshop in South Africa beginning November

¶12. Over the next two weeks, Tamerat reported that he will keep a low profile, put his affairs in order, and restrict

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his weekly column to events in Kenya. He reported that he will not return from South Africa. Over the next two months, the other members of the Addis Neger editorial board and senior officers will also get their affairs in order. Tamerat informed Information Officer that the editorial board has taken the decision to stop publishing Addis Neger within the next two months. Once all senior officers have arranged for somewhere safe from which to operate in the region (but outside of Ethiopia), the editorial board will issue a public statement announcing its decision and motives.

¶9. (C) On October 24, the state-owned English newspaper, the Ethiopian Herald published an opinion article severely criticizing the General Manager of The Reporter, a generally pro-government, privately-owned weekly that is published in both English and Amharic. The op-ed draws attention to the logo in the corner of both the Amharic and English editions which depicts a woman being hung by a bayonette-wielding executioner above the caption "Rescue the Free Press from the Hangman!" The author of the op-ed asks, "What are readers of The Reporter to make of this discrepancy between what they know for a fact and the demand placed on them to rescue the free press from an imaginary hangman. Surely if the private press were in its death-bed throes, the Reporter would have folded." The op-ed cites Amare as having disdain for those who "won the day" in the 2000 Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front internal conflict (Amare is a former member of the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front Central Committee) and an "avaricious appetite for milking riches through the misuses of the free press." Calling Amare a "small-minded dwarf" who takes "cheap shots" at Meles Zenawi and Minister for Government Communications Bereket Simon, the op-ed author claims it is these very leaders "which the Reporter constantly maligns, who resolutely

defended freedom of the press when its constitutional inviolability was on the line." Another Reporter victim is said to be Midroc Ethiopia and its owner, Sheik Mohamed Al-Amoudi, whom the article lauds as Ethiopia's largest employer and one of its biggest investors. The article particularly deplores Amare for implicating a close confidant of Al-Amoudi in a near-fatal assault of Amare that occurred in October 2008. Many contacts have noted that controversial opinion articles such as those that have appeared in the State-owned Addis Zemen and Ethiopian Herald papers recently could not have been published without high-level GOE sanction, and have speculated that these articles may have even been authored by high-level GOE officials.

COMMENT

110. (C) Given the state-owned papers' roles as the voice of internal sentiment from within the ruling party and GoE -- as well as the government's history of targeting private media around elections -- the recent series of public condemnations and warnings to journalists appears to substantiate journalists' perceptions that the GoE has embarked on a systematic effort to silence critics. While the Kassahun Addis and Addis Neger cases reflect pre-emptive actions by journalists themselves to avoid persecution, the effect on Ethiopia's political discourse and media practitioners remains one of a de facto silencing. The closure of Addis Neger will be a loss to public political discourse and analytical journalism in Ethiopia. The apparent stepped-up pace of media harrassment is a key factor in limiting the already restricted political space in Ethiopia and relevant to discussions of democracy planned for them Nov 5 bilateral talks. End Comment.
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